DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 946 HE 026 845

AUTHOR	Conrad, Judi
TITLE	Educating Part-Time Adult Learners in Transition. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.; George Washington Univ., Washington, DC. School of Education and Human Development.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-HE-92-9
PUB DATE	93
CONTRACT	RR930200
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036 ($1).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; Adult Learning; *Adult Students; Continuing Education; Curriculum Design; *Educational Trends; Higher Education; *Midlife Transitions; *Part Time Students; Postsecondary Education; Student Characteristics; Student Needs; Student Personnel Services
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Adult learners, who comprise over half of all students in higher education, are typically part-time students in transition and present special challenges to colleges and universities. These students are primarily seeking to improve their situation through education, and their commitment to self-improvement dictates a different set of aspirations and expectations as compared to traditional students. National Center for Educational Statistics projects that in 1998, of all higher education students, 71.55 percent will be part-time adult learners. This has compelling policy, curriculum, financial, and administrative implications for institutions. To meet the special needs of this population institutions should provide academic counseling, academic support services, mentoring, convenient class location and scheduling, and cocurricular activities. The many services now available to adult students are typically accessible through a bureaucratic maze. Services centralized at a student affairs office could be organized around eight functional areas: specialized services; advocacy; referral; networking and mentoring; education (e.g., life skills training); clearinghouse that links students to campus services and resources; program planning; and counseling. Curricula for adult learners should include individual planning and active, problem-solving, goal-oriented, and cooperative learning. Teacher education programs have targeted adult learners in transition. Growth in continuing education is in the areas of computer training, human resource management, and quality control. Institutions will be wise to respond to the needs of adult learners in curricula; faculty development programs; administrative procedures; and counseling and support services. (JB)

September 1993
EDO-HE-92-9

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> By the year 2000, every adult American. . .will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
> (Goal Five of the National Education Goals)

Who Are the Adult Learners in Transition?

A seminal work by K. Patricia Cross (*Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning, 1991*) remains central to any discussion of adult learners today. Cross presents two models: Characteristics of Adults as Learners (CAL) and Chain-of-Response (COR) which describe the way in which educators have come to view and service the adult learner. Citing demographics, social change, and technology as three factors that will influence the demand for adult education programs, Cross asserts that "it would be difficult to think of some way to live in a society changing as rapidly as ours without constantly learning new things" (Cross, 1981).
The impact of a rapidly changing society is reflected in the growing number of adults engaged in a formal part-time course of study at an institution of higher education. Statistically, adult learners, those 25 years of age or older, constitute over one half of all students enrolled in higher education courses (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 1992). For the most part, these adult learners are in a state of transition seeking to improve their situation through education. They encompass a broad spectrum including growing numbers of women, displaced homemakers, career changers, immigrants, second career retirees, single family parents, and individuals seeking professional development.

The commitment to self improvement suggests a whole different set of aspirations and expectations than those found in the younger full-time student. At the same time, the anxieties and pressures of the older part-time student may far exceed those of the traditional student. The nature of both their needs and demands has major implications for institutions of higher education. NCES projects for 1991 (over the 1988 estimates) a total increase of 13.31 percent for fulltime students aged 25 years and over and a 10.31 increase for part-time adult students. This means that 71.77 percent of all students enrolled in all institutions of higher education were estimated to be part-time in 1991. For 1998, NCES projects 71.55 percent part-time adult student enrollment and 71.62 percent for 2003. Such projections suggest important policy, curriculum, financial, and administrative implications for postsecondary education institutions.

What Are the Special Needs of the Part-Time Adult Learner in Transition?

Given the diversity of part-time adult learners, there are many more considerations our institutions need to address. A general principle might be to provide maximum services that are easily accessible.

Academic counseling, for example, should be readily available so that the particular goals of the adult learner are established at the beginning of the course of study so that each course taken builds upon those goals. Academic support services are vital to students unsure of their ability to succeed. Among the more interesting approaches to academic support services are programs that provide peer mentoring, mentoring, and encourage active and cooperative learning, although the traditional programs that support specific skill development are also valuable.

There is evidence that the ease with which an adult learner can complete the admissions and registration process is related to successful recruitment and retention (The College Board, 1990). Moreover, the convenience of classroom location and course schedules are important considerations for part-time adult learners, since they inevitably have other obligations (e.g., job or family) and limited time. It is important that institutions of higher education recognize and support cocurricular activities that enhance the social and cultural integration of the part-time adult learner. Research indicates correlation between social and cultural comfort, student retention rates, and academic achievement (See Caracelli 1988 for a model that looks at the relationship between "identity status stability" and student retention among a cohort of 70 adult women).

What Services Are Available to the Adult Learner in Transition?

The list of services profiled in *100 Ways Colleges Serve Adults* (The College Board, 1990) is indicative of the many ways in which colleges serve adult learners. This readable book presents examples of successful college programs in the following service areas: academic counseling; academic support services; admissions; advertising and marketing; cocurricular activities; community relations; convenient location/scheduling; curriculum; publications; recruiting; registration; and services. The extent of this list suggests the bureaucratic maze that must be negotiated if the student is to benefit from all services offered. Delight E. Champagne (*Planning Development Interventions for Adult Students*, 1987) asserts that because the student affairs office cuts across all other campus services, it should assume primary responsibility for coordinating and promoting campus services suitable for the adult student. Champagne presents a student affairs intervention model based on eight functional areas: specialized services; advocacy; referral; networking and mentoring; education (e.g., life skills training); clearinghouse that links students to campus services and resources; program planning (workshops and support groups); and counseling (individual, group, and peer group).

How Should the Curriculum Differ for the Part-Time Adult Student?

A major difference between curriculua for the part-time adult student and the traditional student results from the fact that the former, by and large, are voluntary students with specific learning objectives in mind. If their objectives are to be met, it is important, that those objectives be identified and that each adult student be consulted in the development of their own curricula. Active, problem-solving, goal-oriented, and cooperative learning are among the more successful teaching strategies (Cavallere and Sgrol, 1992). The adult learner is generally less tolerant of the more passive lecture format and eager to take responsibility for learning. See Baron and Rusnak, 1990 for description of an alternative teacher certification program designed to encourage and nurture math, science, and engineering professionals willing to change careers.

Which Disciplines Are Targeting Adult Learners in Transition?

A search of the ERIC database suggests that teacher education programs have made a concerted effort to target adult learners in transition (Powell, 1992; Faulkner, 1992; Baron, 1990; Hensel, 1991; Ryan and Spangler, 1991; Madfes, 1991; Madfes, 1989; Shotel, 1987); however, there is little evidence that other disciplines are paying particular attention to the special needs of the adult learner. Julie L. Nicklin (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1991) reports that the greatest growth in continuing education is in the areas of computer training, human resource management, and quality control.

What Are the Implications for Colleges and Universities?

If the projections for increases in the numbers of transitional adult learners are at all accurate, institutions of higher education should benefit from targeting programs to this population. *Restructuring Teacher Education for Career Switchers* (Ryan and Spangler, 1991) offers a good example of such a targeted program. This is a master's degree program at Otterbein College designed to provide an alternative route to teacher certification for career changers. With the exception of the full-time, 16-week teaching internship, the format at Otterbein is a part-time program specifically designed to accommodate the working adult. It offers a liberal arts theme as the curriculum focus and matches course content with field and clinical experiences.

Virtually all 3,000 postsecondary academic institutions and the more than 8,000 proprietary schools already include some kind of short courses for adults. (Hunt, Ed., 1992). There is a substantial body of research on lifelong and continuing education which encompasses everything from adult learner motivational theory to adult learning environments, including the more narrow field of professional continuing education. There are hundreds of thousands of private sector and not-for-profit institutions and organizations that provide educational opportunities of varying quality and duration for the adult learner. Institutions of higher education are increasingly challenged by this competition and they are well advised to look to the body of research on adult learners and that relating to campus services if they are to remain competitive. But, the dearth of information on discipline-specific adult learner programs suggests that institutions of higher education need to consider discipline specific recruitment programs for adult learners in transition.

Tapping into the research and experience of life-long learning and continuing education seems to be a reasonable approach. Educating "every adult American to possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in the global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (National Education Goals) is a tall order, requiring major changes in postsecondary education. Specifically, institutions of higher education need to address policy issues associated with changes in the following areas: curricula; faculty development programs; administrative procedures; and counseling and support services that meet the needs of the adult learner in transition.

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This publication was partially prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED RR-93-0200. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the department.

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